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MASON 'BRILLIANT'

SERVING SOUTH NIAGARA

(\$1.00 PLUS G.S.T.) \$1.06

Craig Mason as The Flying Bandit.

Mason 'brilliant' in Flying Bandit

■ CANADIAN HISTORY TAKES THE STAGE AT ROSELAWN

BY LYNN PEPPAS
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Showboat Festival theatre's *The Flying Bandit* that opened last Thursday evening at the Roselawn Centre in Port Colborne, was an impressive one-actor drama, wherein actor Craig Mason, distinctly brought over 25 characters to vivid life onstage in the two-hour performance. Mason is one-man acting tour de force who was truly mesmerizing to watch as he delivered the story of notorious Canadian charismatic thief, Ken Leishman, through a number of scenes with multiple characters.

Canadian playwright, Lindsay Price, based *The Flying Bandit* on the true-life accounts of the much-adored criminal Leishman, after discovering the story while on tour with her life-partner, as well as the theatre-partner, Mason, and wrote the play with Mason in mind.

For the most part, this play unfolds through the narrator Daniel, who begins as a young, impressionable boy struggling with the morality issues behind a man who steals for a living, and yet achieves it with a certain style and wins the hearts of Canadians. Daniel's parents, immigrants who fled the Ukraine during wartime, are the two-sides of this morality struggle, his mother disagreeing with her son's admiration for the common criminal whereas Daniel's father finds Leishman's story fascinating and actually nurtures his son's love for newspaper reports. As Daniel grows through the play he begins his own scrapbook of articles on Leishman's life of crime between Winnipeg and Toronto, beginning in the late '50s, and the scenes often segue from family discussions about Leishman into scenes portraying the thief's gentlemanly approach to robbing banks, escaping prisons, and organizing the largest gold heist in Canadian history.

During this play, there are scenes and conversations with multiple characters onstage, that Mason is brilliant at, providing clarity through facial expression and voice, as he conducts

heated conversations between three and four characters at a time, with amazing dexterity. There were no seams or loose threads in Mason's performance as he, with the subtlest of changes, enacted layers of stories and characters. When becoming Daniel's mother, Mason tapped his ring against a wooden table or chair to give the cutting-board sound of his mother working in the kitchen, and depicting her voice with a catch in her throat. This role(s) puts Mason through his acting paces, to which he keeps up, making it look effortless when anything but, would be the truth.

A contemporary, circular stage, located in the middle of the audience, with minimal props; just a few swivel stools and table, allowed Mason to relocate the action as he shifts from narrator to true crime story, by taking a few steps. The onus of scene change is almost entirely up to Mason's acting skill, and this stage design unclutters those transitions. Lighting too is essential to the action, but subtly done, a bright wash of light surrounded the narrator and his family interactions, whereas a dusky light signaled the clandestine actions surrounding the enacted Leishman stories.

I liked the fact that this is a Canadian story, that worked on a number of levels. Obviously, it's a piece of Canadian history that's uniquely brought to life onstage, but there's other elements at subtle work here too. As Daniel collects a scrapbook of newspaper accounts on Leishman, enacting the story as reported through the media, there's an open discussion of credibility, and there being two-sides (or seven-sides) to every story. The whole morality issue of a criminal achieving hero status is at work as well, as even those who Leishman had kidnapped during his prison escape, admitted openly that their kidnapper had been a 'nice guy.' Finally, an very artful portrayal of multiple characters, often at the same time, showcases Mason's skill as an actor in this challenging play.

■ The *Flying Bandit* plays until Saturday, Aug. 11 with evening shows from Wednesday to Saturday, and matinee performances on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday. Tickets are \$20-\$26 and can be reserved by calling the box office at 905-834-0833.